

Loud and Proud (and Anxious)

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Loud and Proud (and Anxious)

by [BluishFrog](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander loves his new life. A life where he gets to go home with Ilya every day, where he gets to tell his friends and his team about the stupidly romantic things Ilya does without even noticing, where he gets to call Ilya his husband and no one thinks it's a joke.

Sharing that love with the world? That's where it gets a little more complicated. Because even if Shane wants to loudly declare just how fucking incredible it is to love Ilya Rozanov—and be loved by him in return—sharing even the smallest detail of their private life with a wider audience makes him feel about the same as being slammed headfirst into the stands.

Or: Shane might have left the closet behind him, but it takes a while before the closet stops haunting him.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1: Denial

At the beginning, he does it out of spite.

He reads an article with his name in the headline, sees some comments, then red (hot, furious, fire red)—and before he has an actual, conscious thought about it, the pictures are selected, neatly put together, the post drafted, reviewed, rewritten, and the share button pressed.

It takes Shane a minute to realize what he's done.

He spends that minute sipping on a new protein shake Ilya had brought home for him to try. Something not as sweet as the ones Ilya prefers, but still carrying a faint taste of strawberries. Shane decides that he wants to make breakfast and grabs some ingredients from the fridge.

As he takes the eggs, debating whether to make his usual scrambled eggs with tomato or if today feels like an omelet kind of day, the realization of what he's done hits him as hard as the eggs hit the floor.

There's a beat of absolute stillness.

Yolk seeps across the tile, slow and bright, and Shane just stands there, hands empty, chest tight, the last of his anger still buzzing under his skin like static. For a second, he almost laughs (short, sharp, wrong) but the sound never makes it past his throat.

He doesn't check his phone.

He tells himself it's because he has a mess to clean up, because leaving raw egg on the floor is gross, because this is normal, mundane, manageable. Not because the phone lies face down on the counter and if he is busy cleaning up, he can't turn it and check if his life is blowing up. He grabs paper towels, wipes the floor, tosses shells into the trash. His movements are careful, overly precise, the kind of focus that doesn't require thinking. The anger ebbs, draining out of him, leaving something flatter behind.

When he finally flips the phone over, it's already vibrating in his hand.

Notifications stack faster than he can read them. Likes, comments, tags, messages he doesn't open. The screen keeps lighting up, again and again, until the noise blurs together into something meaningless. Too fast. Too loud. The last of the red slips away, replaced by a spreading numbness, as if his body has decided this is the only way to survive.

The article creeps back in once the numbness settles, slips through the cracks now that the anger has burned itself out. Phrases surface uninvited, half-remembered but sharp: *strained*, *distant*, *hard to read*. He can picture the headline without opening it again, can hear the smug certainty threaded through every line, the way speculation dresses itself up as concern.

They never see you together, it implies. *They never see you happy*.

Shane unlocks his phone and can't help but open the article he had been reading again. It's still open in his browser, the last passage still staring at him, still hurting him exactly where it hurts most.

"What started as an epic love story," the article says, "seems to tickle out into nothing. At least, that's what their limited interactions on ice imply. Not a hard conclusion to reach when even their handshakes seem forced."

Shane swallows and scrolls down to the comments without really reading any of them, thumb moving out of habit. He thinks about all the times he's learned to keep his hands to himself, to stand just a little too far away, to save the easy touches for hallways and kitchens and places with doors that close. About how instinctive it still is, even now, even married, to make himself smaller in public. Palatable. Safe.

The numbness deepens, settles heavy in his chest. He tells himself the article is wrong—because it *is*—but that doesn't stop the old shame from flaring, from whispering that maybe he helped write it.

Before he can go further down the road of asking himself why he finds it so damn hard to openly show his affection, the kitchen door swings open with a soft thud, and Ilya breezes in like nothing in the world has ever gone wrong. He's humming (off-key, unapologetic) and claps his hands once, sharp and loud, like he's announcing himself to an audience that isn't there. Shane thinks that, if love had physical symptoms, one look at this man would have him bleeding all over the kitchen floors.

"Okay," Ilya says, bright and cheerful, already opening a cupboard, "important question. Do we have bread, or do we only have sad bread?"

Shane startles despite himself, phone nearly slipping from his fingers. He locks the screen on instinct and shoves it face down on the counter, forcing his mouth into something that might pass for a smile.

"Define sad," he says, aiming for light, aiming for normal. "Because emotionally, I think all our bread is doing great."

Ilya snorts, grinning, and turns around with a loaf in his hands—then pauses. It's subtle, the way his expression shifts, the way his eyes flick from Shane's face to the paper towels in the trash, to the faint smear on the floor Shane must have missed. The grin doesn't disappear, but it softens, tilts into something more careful.

"You drop something?" he asks, gently.

"Yeah," Shane says quickly. "Just eggs. Casual kitchen violence. You know how it is."

He waits for the laugh, for Ilya to riff on it, to exaggerate, to turn it into a bit that he can tease Shane about. That's what usually happens. Ilya is good at that. At taking the edge off things, at meeting jokes with bigger ones and making the moment lighter by sheer force of personality.

But Ilya doesn't take the bait.

He sets the bread down and steps closer instead, head tilting as he studies Shane like a puzzle he's already halfway solved. "You okay?"

The question lands heavier than it should. Shane shrugs, too quick, and gestures vaguely around the kitchen. "Yeah. Totally. Just—thinking about breakfast. I was debating if I should make omelets. Do you want one?"

Ilya hums, unconvinced. He reaches out, not touching, just close enough that Shane can feel the warmth of him. "You're doing the thing," he says, still soft, still calm.

Shane's smile wobbles. "What thing?"

"The one where you pretend everything's fine and hope I make a joke so you don't have to explain," Ilya says. There's no accusation in it. Just recognition.

Shane feels so seen, he has to look away.

For a moment, Ilya doesn't say anything. He just nods once, slow, like he's taking Shane in exactly as he is, frayed edges and all.

"Tell me," he says then. Not sharp, not urgent. Still gentle—but steady, grounded, the exact kind of demanding that doesn't let Shane wriggle out of it. "I want to help."

The words knock something loose.

"I read something," Shane says, and it all spills out before he can stop it, tumbling over itself, messy and unfiltered. "And then I posted something, and now I don't know if I'm sad or angry or—" He breaks off, frustrated, breath hitching. "I don't know what I am."

Ilya's mouth curves into a small, understanding smile. "You can be both," he says easily. "Sad and angry. Is okay to be both."

Shane lets out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "Okay."

"What did you read?" Ilya asks. "That made you upset?"

"Just a stupid article." Shane winces the moment the words leave his mouth. He knows he's dodging it, wrapping it in dismissal like that makes it smaller, safer. It doesn't.

Ilya watches him for a second, then nods again. "Do you want to show me?" he asks. "Might be easier."

The reaction is instant. Shane shakes his head, sharp and decisive, before he can talk himself into it. His stomach twists, tight and sour. He doesn't want Ilya to see it. He doesn't even know exactly why—not in a way that makes sense out loud.

Part of him is afraid Ilya might agree with it.

Part of him is afraid Ilya might see something true in it.

A bigger part of him knows that's bullshit. Knows Ilya would never think that, never measure their marriage in camera angles and public gestures. Knows that even having those thoughts feels like a betrayal. The realization only makes everything worse, shame stacking on top of shame until it's hard to breathe.

His thoughts spiral, pulling in opposite directions, each one louder than the last. He feels split down the middle, like there's no version of this where he doesn't come up lacking.

"I posted pictures of us on Instagram," Shane says instead, the words rushed, like if he gets them out fast enough they'll hurt less. "I'm sorry I didn't ask if you were okay with that."

That part, at least, is clean. A mistake he can name. Something concrete. He latches onto it because it's easier than unpacking the rest—the fear, the anger, the old habits that refuse to die.

Ilya's expression doesn't change the way Shane expects it to. There's no surprise, no irritation. Just a quiet attentiveness that somehow makes his chest ache even more.

"Hey," Ilya says, finally reaching out, thumb brushing against Shane's wrist like he's testing the ground. "I'm not mad."

Shane swallows hard, eyes burning. "I know," he says, though he isn't sure if he actually does.

Instead of asking any follow-up questions, Ilya shifts a little closer. He doesn't crowd him, doesn't assume. He tilts his head, searching Shane's face one more time, like he's checking for something written between the lines.

"Can I hug you?" he asks.

The question alone almost breaks Shane.

He nods, the movement small and jerky, like his body has forgotten how to do things smoothly. "Yeah," he says, voice rough. "Please."

Ilya closes the distance slowly, deliberately, giving Shane time to pull away if he wants to. He doesn't. The moment Ilya's arms come around him, something in Shane gives, tension slipping loose all at once. He exhales hard, breath shuddering out of him, and lets his forehead drop against Ilya's shoulder.

The hug is warm. Solid. Real.

Ilya's hand presses between Shane's shoulder blades, firm and grounding, while the other curls around his waist, anchoring him there. It's not the kind of hug meant to soothe quickly and move on. It's the kind that says *stay*. The kind that doesn't rush to fix anything.

At first, Shane's body stays rigid out of habit, muscles coiled tight like he's bracing for impact. His hands hover awkwardly at Ilya's sides, unsure. Then Ilya gives him a gentle

squeeze, just once, and waits. That's all it takes. Shane's fingers curl into the fabric of Ilya's shirt, grip tightening like he's afraid that if he lets go, he'll float apart.

Time stretches.

Shane feels Ilya's breathing first (slow, steady, unhurried) and without realizing it, he starts to match it. In, out. In, out. The noise in his head dulls, thoughts losing their sharp edges, blurring into something softer, quieter. The anger fades completely, and even the numbness starts to thaw, replaced by a heavy, aching calm.

Ilya smells like home: laundry detergent and coffee and something unmistakably him. Shane presses closer, letting his weight rest fully against Ilya's chest. He knows, objectively, that he isn't small—years of professional hockey have carved that knowledge into him in muscle and bone. He's tall, solid, used to being the one who hits back harder, who holds his ground. And yet, here, in Ilya's arms, he feels small in the exact right ways. Not diminished, not weak, just held. Contained. Cared for. He can feel the faint vibration of Ilya humming again, low and wordless, right against his ear. It seeps into him, settles somewhere deep.

They don't move. Not when the fridge hums to life. Not when another notification buzzes against the counter. Not when minutes pass. Five, maybe ten, maybe half an eternity. The world narrows down to this: arms wrapped tight, a steady heartbeat under Shane's cheek, the quiet understanding that he doesn't have to explain himself right now.

Eventually, Shane realizes his shoulders have dropped. His jaw unclenches. His thoughts slow enough that he can actually follow one all the way through without it splintering. He feels safe enough to exist in his own skin again.

"I've got you," Ilya murmurs.

Something in Shane's chest aches, deep and tender. He tightens his grip, just a little, pressing his face further into Ilya's shoulder. The hug keeps going, long past the point where it would be polite to let go, long enough that it stops being a comfort and becomes a constant.

Eventually, the hug loosens. Not because either of them pulls away, but because it shifts, eases into something that still holds. Shane stays close, forehead still tucked against Ilya's shoulder, when he speaks again.

"Can I show you the pictures I posted?" he asks quietly.

The words feel like a hurdle he has to clear. He wants to get it over with, wants to make amends for the rule he broke, the rule of asking each other for permission before they post each other, even if he knows—*knows*—that it exists mostly for his sake. Ilya has never shied away from being seen with him after their outing. Has never treated their love like something fragile or private by default. Ilya loves loudly, openly, like it's the most natural thing in the world. Shane has watched him do it for years, first in half-hidden snapshots that only made sense in hindsight, then more boldly once hiding was no longer necessary.

Knowing all of that doesn't make this easier.

Ilya pulls back just enough to look at him, one hand still firm at Shane's waist. "Da," he says easily. "Show me."

Shane reaches for his phone, hands steady now, and opens the post. He scrolls once, twice, then angles the screen so Ilya can see. He watches Ilya's face instead of the pictures, bracing for something he can't quite name.

Ilya hums appreciatively almost immediately. "We look good together," he says.

Shane lets out a breath that almost turns into a laugh.

Ilya swipes through the pictures slowly, smile fond, like he's revisiting memories rather than seeing them for the first time. "I mean," he adds, glancing up at Shane, eyes bright with mischief, "obviously you look incredible. But also, to be fair, everyone looks good with me. It's a documented phenomenon."

Shane's heart stutters at the word. Phenomenon. Ilya's newest obsession. Harris had shown him a song on a flight the week before—something about a phenomenon, or maybe the female version of it; Shane hadn't really followed. He'd been too busy absently playing with Ilya's fingers, half-asleep, forehead pressed to his shoulder. Since then, Ilya had been determined to wedge the word into every conversation, no matter how little sense it made, like he was trying to wear it out through sheer repetition. The familiarity of it, the stupid fondness tied up in the memory, settles warm in Shane's chest.

"Wow," Shane says, a real chuckle breaking free now. "Humble."

"I try," Ilya replies solemnly, then leans in to press a quick kiss to Shane's temple. "But really. I love it."

Something in Shane's chest loosens further at that, the knot finally giving way. The guilt he'd been holding onto fades, just a little, replaced by warmth. Ilya being Ilya, it feels like reassurance in its purest form.

"I will share it," Ilya says, with the air of someone announcing a victory. He lifts the phone a little higher, tilts it as if he's already picturing the caption, pride practically radiating off him. For a second, Shane is convinced Ilya's about to add it to some imaginary mental shelf labeled *My Husband, Acquired*.

"Oh, shut up," Shane says, warmth creeping into his voice despite himself. "This isn't a trophy you won."

Ilya grins, unabashed. "Too late. Very shiny trophy. World-class. I am very proud."

Shane huffs out a laugh, nudging him lightly with his shoulder. "You're impossible."

"And yet," Ilya says, looping an arm back around Shane's waist, easy and familiar, "you married me."

"Questionable judgment on my part," Shane replies, but there's no bite to it. Just fondness, soft and real.

They linger like that for a while, trading quiet nonsense back and forth—about captions that would be too much, about whether hashtags are embarrassing or ironic, about how Ilya insists every photo of Shane is art and Shane insists this is a lie. The heaviness doesn't disappear all at once, but it thins, slowly, like fog lifting with the morning.

Eventually, when the kitchen feels warmer again, more lived-in, Ilya sobers just a little. Not enough to darken the mood, just enough to steady it.

“Do you want to explain,” he asks gently, “what made you so upset? What pushed you to post pictures when you normally don't?”

Shane hesitates. The question doesn't hurt the way it did before, but the answer still feels too close, too tangled to touch without unraveling everything else along with it. He shakes his head, small but sure.

“Not yet,” he says. “I just—can't. Right now.”

Ilya nods immediately, no hesitation, no disappointment. “Okay,” he accepts and presses a kiss to Shane's temple before he goes and grabs some eggs from the fridge and starts making enough omelets for two.

Chapter 2: Anger

Just a few days later, Shane is so fucking angry, he thinks he finally understands why people rage.

It's not the sharp, clean anger he's familiar with—the kind that burns off during practice, that sharpens his focus, that gets packed away neatly when the whistle blows. This is something else entirely. This is hot and sprawling and reckless, a living thing that takes up residence under his skin and refuses to be ignored. It coils in his chest, heavy and volatile, like it's looking for an excuse.

There's something searing about it. Destructive. Ugly in a way Shane doesn't like to name.

It scares him how easily it takes over.

He can feel it in his hands first, fingers flexing, itching to grab onto something and break it. In the way his jaw locks, teeth grinding hard enough to hurt. In the narrowing of his vision, the world sharpening into angles and edges, everything suddenly defined by how easily it could be ruined. The thought doesn't even feel foreign. It feels tempting.

Part of him wants to shove the feeling down, deep and hard, like he's done with so many other things. Wants to bury it somewhere dark and airtight and never acknowledge it again. Pretend this isn't him. Pretend he's still the calm one, the reasonable one, the guy who keeps his head when everyone else loses theirs.

But another part of him—louder, rawer—wants to let it loose.

Wants to see what would happen if he stopped holding himself back. If he let the anger spill out unchecked, let it burn whatever it touches. He imagines the aftermath in vivid, unwelcome detail: broken things, raised voices, scorched earth. Proof that the anger is real. Proof that it has weight. Proof that it can do something.

The thought makes his chest tighten, breath coming fast and shallow. He hates how much he wants it. Hates how good it would probably feel, just for a moment, to stop being careful.

Shane has always believed control was a kind of safety. That if he held himself together tightly enough, nothing could crack through. Standing there now, flooded with rage that feels bigger than him, he's forced to confront the possibility that control was never the absence of anger at all.

It was just the lock on the door.

Before he can lash out, Ilya grabs him by the jersey and yanks him back.

The motion is sharp, decisive—no hesitation, no gentling—and it cuts clean through the red haze just long enough to redirect it. Shane stumbles, skates scraping, body jerking forward as Ilya drags him off the ice. He barely registers it. The boards, the tunnel, the familiar echo of

the hallway—all of it blurs together, swallowed by the roar still tearing through his head. He knows the route by heart, could walk it blind on any other day, but now it might as well be nowhere.

The next thing he's aware of is the hard impact of his back against cold metal.

Ilya shoves him into a locker, both of them still fully geared, pads clattering, helmets knocking together. The sound rings too loud in the small space. Ilya's weight pins him there, solid and immovable, one arm braced across Shane's chest, the other locking his wrists up and out of the way before Shane can even think about swinging.

The position is familiar.

Shane knows this shape, this pressure—the way Ilya crowds his space, holds him there with intent. Usually it's heat, grounding, want. Usually it makes his breath catch for entirely different reasons. Usually it feels like safety wrapped in something sharp-edged and thrilling.

Not now.

Now, the contact just feeds the fire. The anger surges, violent and desperate, clawing its way up his spine. He wants to punch, to kick, to rake his nails down anything within reach. He wants to hurt something simply because the hurt has nowhere else to go. It has nothing to do with desire, nothing to do with closeness. It's pain for the sake of pain, destruction for the sake of release.

His body bucks against the hold, a snarl tearing out of his throat before he can stop it.

Ilya tightens his grip instantly. Not rougher—firmer. Absolute. Unyielding. He plants his skates, braces like he's holding back a storm, forearm solid against Shane's chest, voice low and sharp in his ear.

“No,” he says, and it's not a command so much as a line in the sand.

Shane hates how relieved he is that they're still wearing their gear. That even if Ilya had taken off his own helmet, there's still padding between them, layers and barriers and plastic and foam absorbing the worst of it. Hates—and is grateful—for the way Ilya's arms keep him locked, controlled, giving him no angle, no leverage, no chance of actually hurting Ilya.

Because somewhere beneath the rage, beneath the urge to burn everything down, there's a cold, lucid certainty: if Shane leaned into the rage, if he actually ended up leashing out and landing even one real hit, he wouldn't know how to forgive himself.

The thought flickers through him like a warning light, distant but insistent.

He sags against the locker instead, breath coming harsh and uneven, anger still raging but trapped now, contained by Ilya's body, by his presence, by the fact that he's here and not letting go.

“It's not fair,” Shane says.

The words come out rough, scraped raw on the way up, but there's no bite left in them. The anger that had filled him to the brim finally starts to drain, bleeding out slow and heavy, leaving his limbs weak. His head drops forward, chin brushing his chest, and he lets himself sink fully into Ilya's hold.

"No," Ilya agrees. "Is not."

He doesn't loosen his grip right away. Keeps Shane pinned there, steady and solid, like he knows that letting go too soon would send everything crashing down again. The rage ebbs, receding like a tide, and what it leaves behind is worse in some ways—hollow and aching and impossibly tired.

Shane swallows. Tries to keep talking. The words tangle up in his mouth, every attempt at explanation splintering before it can fully form. He opens his mouth, closes it again. Shakes his head, frustrated.

"I just—" He exhales sharply. "I hate that it still—" Still does this to him. Still gets under his skin. Still turns him into someone he doesn't recognize. "I hate that they—" *They* is too big. Too vague. He doesn't know how to narrow it down without admitting how much power it has.

Ilya waits. Doesn't interrupt. Doesn't rush him. Just stays there, a quiet constant.

"It started during the game," Shane manages finally. His voice is lower now, stripped of adrenaline. "One of them—" He squeezes his eyes shut. "He said something. About us. About you."

Ilya's jaw tightens, just barely.

"He kept chirping," Shane continues, the memory sour on his tongue. "Thought it was funny. Thought he was clever." He lets out a short, humorless breath. "Marriage jokes. Slurs dressed up like trash talk."

The helplessness hits him all at once, sharp and nauseating. "I hate that it works," he admits, the confession burning. "That they can say one thing, and suddenly I'm not on the ice anymore. I'm just—" exposed. Like everything he's fought so hard to build can be reduced to a punchline.

Ilya leans in, forehead pressing briefly to the side of Shane's helmet. "That says things about him," he says firmly. "Not you."

Shane nods, even though the frustration still twists in his chest. He knows that. Intellectually. But knowing it doesn't stop the damage. Doesn't stop the way it drags him backward, into old instincts and old fear, into the exhausting work of holding himself together in a world that keeps testing the seams.

He breathes out slowly, anger gone now, leaving only the ache of it all.

“I thought I could handle it,” Shane admits after a moment. His voice is steadier now, but there’s still something raw underneath. “I really did. And then he said something again when we shook hands. I wasn’t expecting it. The game was over.” He swallows. “I kinda lost it.”

Ilya lets out a little snort, the kind that sounds like it escaped before he could stop it. Shane loves that sound. Has loved it for years.

“I know,” Ilya points out. “I saw.”

The way he says it—so certain, so present—makes something warm and painful bloom in Shane’s chest all at once. He thinks, not for the first time and probably not the last, about how absurdly much he loves this man. How instinctive it is. How deep.

“Thank you,” Shane whispers. “For getting me out.”

“I cannot let you start fighting now,” he replies, mock-serious. “After all these years of discipline.” His mouth quirks. “Also, you still look like angry kitten. Very fierce. Very small.” He makes a tiny clawing motion with his fingers. “Cute. But bad for fighting.”

Despite everything, a weak laugh slips out of Shane. He shakes his head. “Wow. So supportive.”

“Always,” Ilya says, and despite the banter, there’s nothing joking about it.

But as the moment stretches, Shane notices the little things. The way Ilya’s accent is heavier than usual, consonants slipping, grammar bending in places it normally wouldn’t. The way his jokes come a fraction too fast, like he’s stacking them on purpose, building a buffer between them and what he’s actually feeling.

It lands quietly, but it lands.

Ilya is affected too. More than he’s letting on.

Shane’s anger may have burned hot and visible, but Ilya’s runs deeper, controlled, tucked away behind humor and steady hands. The realization makes Shane’s chest ache all over again.

He leans forward, resting his helmet gently against Ilya’s shoulder this time, not needing to be held down anymore. Just close.

“I’m okay now,” Shane says, and he isn’t entirely sure which one of them he’s trying to convince more.

Ilya doesn’t answer right away. He shifts just enough that Shane can feel the movement through the pads, the solid reassurance of him still being there. Then, he asks, “Are you?”

A younger version of Shane would have bristled at that. Would have flushed, felt exposed, resented how easily Ilya could see past the words he put up like shields. Would have mistaken being known for being cornered.

This Shane just feels grateful.

He exhales, slow and heavy, the sound rattling a little in his chest. “No,” he acknowledges. The word comes out softer than he expects, but steadier too. “I mean—what he said wasn’t okay. None of it was okay.” He swallows, fingers curling briefly into the edge of Ilya’s jersey, grounding himself. “But neither was how I reacted.”

The frustration creeps back in, dull and persistent. Not the rage from before, but something quieter, more insidious. “I don’t like that I lost control,” he says. “I don’t like that they still get to reach in and pull something like that out of me.”

He shakes his head, helmet brushing against Ilya’s shoulder. He wants to take it off, but can’t quite manage the energy to do it. “I should be better at this by now. Stronger. Past it.”

Ilya shifts again, this time turning just enough that Shane can feel the pressure of his forehead against the side of Shane’s helmet once more. It’s a familiar gesture, intimate in its simplicity.

“You are strong,” Ilya states firmly. “This is not weakness.”

Shane lets the words sink in. He understands what Ilya means, knows he’s right, too, but that doesn’t make everything inside him suddenly line up.

“I know,” he says after a moment. “I really do.” He shifts slightly, enough to breathe easier. “It’s just— I think I’m carrying around more of this than I want to admit.” He hesitates, searching for the shape of it. “Stuff that isn’t good. Or at least not helpful?”

Ilya doesn’t pull away. If anything, he presses closer. Shane really needs to get rid of his helmet, so he can bury himself into Ilya’s neck.

“Not all feelings have to be good,” Ilya says simply. “But they still have to be felt.”

Shane huffs out a quiet breath. “Yeah.” He nods. “Yeah, I know that too.”

Silence falls between them, not uncomfortable. Shane stares at the scuffed floor, the familiar marks and lines grounding him in the present. When he speaks again, his voice is careful, but sure.

“I think,” he says, “I might want to talk to someone. Professionally.” He winces a little, bracing for something that he knows would never come. Never from Ilya. “Just to... work through it. Figure out what’s mine to carry and what I can put down.”

Ilya’s response is immediate. “Good,” he says, without hesitation. There’s warmth there, and pride, and something like relief. “Sounds like good idea.”

He pushes Shane back just far enough to look at him properly. “I will help,” he adds. “With finding someone. Or with schedules. Or with sitting quietly afterward if you want.” A beat. “Whatever you need.”

Something in Shane loosens at that, the tight knot in his chest easing just a little more. He leans back into Ilya, steadying himself in the certainty of it.

“Thank you,” he says again, even softer this time.

The moment settles, warm and steady, before shifting—subtly at first, like a change in lighting.

“You know,” Shane says, the tension finally easing from his shoulders, “the world really doesn’t give you enough credit.”

Ilya hums again. “For what?”

“For how smart you are,” Shane explains. “And thoughtful. And—” he searches for the right word, then adds, “how perceptive. You see things. You always have.”

Ilya pulls back, eyebrows lifting. “Ah,” he says. “So this is part where you praise me before asking for something?”

Shane snorts. “You wish. I’m serious.”

Ilya’s mouth curves into that familiar, infuriatingly pleased grin. “Of course I am smart,” he says, settling fully back into cocky territory. “Very clever. Very handsome. Multitalented. Honestly, is a mystery how people survive without acknowledging this more.”

Shane rolls his eyes, but the fondness is immediate, overwhelming. He thinks—not for the first and definitely not for the last time—about how much he loves all of this. The steadiness. The softness. The confidence. The way Ilya can hold him together one minute and make him laugh the next.

“Unbelievable,” Shane mutters, smiling despite himself.

“True,” Ilya corrects.

The noise of the rink feels far away now. Shane’s fingers finally finding the clasp of his helmet, undoing it in one smooth motion. He barely has time to register the faint echo of voices somewhere down the hall, the distant possibility of teammates barging in, before he grabs the front of Ilya’s jersey and pulls him in.

Chapter 3: Bargaining

In the past two hours—less than two hours, really, but he is choosing to round up, choosing to give himself the credit—Shane has told himself that everything is fine so many times the words have started to hollow out. *Everything is fine. Everything is fine. Everything is fine*, until it sounds less like reassurance and more like a spell he's failing to cast.

Objectively speaking, everything *is* fine. He knows that. He can line the facts up neatly, one after another, like pucks on the ice. This is normal. This is allowed. This is something the average human being does without a second thought. Hell, it's something the average NHL hockey player probably does more often than most people, and Shane occupies both categories. If anything, the weird part isn't that he's here doing this—it's that it's taken him so long to get here at all.

He repeats that logic to himself, cycles through it again and again, bargains with it. He holds on to the sentences he worked out together with his therapist. *You're safe. You're allowed. Nothing bad is happening.* The reasoning is airtight. Impeccable. It just doesn't sink in.

His nerves stay stretched tight, drawn thin like they're waiting for impact. His shoulders refuse to fully drop. Every loud laugh that cracks through the room makes something in him flinch, a reflex he can't quite override. He catches himself twitching, fingers curling and uncurling, jaw setting without his permission. He keeps glancing over his shoulder every couple of minutes, sometimes without even realizing he's doing it.

He's not sure what he's bracing for. Cameras shoved into his face, maybe, the sudden flash and click of being seen when he isn't ready. Or fists? Maybe words sharp enough to feel like fists. His body doesn't seem to care about the distinction. It reacts like danger is imminent, like the past is about to repeat itself, if he doesn't stay alert, if he doesn't keep watch.

It's frustrating in a way that makes his chest ache. He knows better. He knows this isn't a threat, knows that nothing about this moment is hostile or unsafe. And yet, his body refuses to stand down, refuses to accept harmlessness at face value.

So he keeps telling himself it's fine. Keeps negotiating with the part of him that learned a long time ago that fine is temporary, that safety is conditional, that the moment you relax is the moment something goes wrong.

The bar itself is familiar. That's the thing that should make this easier. It's dim in a way that feels intentional rather than sketchy, warm wood and low lights, a place that smells like beer and fried food. The kind of place the team ends up after games. Familiar faces crowd the high table they've claimed—guys he trusts, guys Ilya has trusted for years. Teammates. Friends.

Ilya is here too. Shane watches him from where he's perched at the bar, leaning in to talk to the bartender, one hand lifted as he gestures for another round. He looks relaxed, loose in a way he only gets when he's off the ice and not performing anything for anyone. Comfortable. At home in his own skin.

Shane tells himself to borrow that feeling. To let it rub off on him. He keeps his eyes on Ilya's easy posture, the way he laughs at something the bartender says like there's no calculation behind it. Shane wants that ease. Wants it badly.

Ilya's presence always comforts him. That's a given. It's instinctive, bone-deep. And at the same time—because his world is built on cruel contradictions—Ilya is also the sharp edge of Shane's anxiety tonight. Not Ilya himself. Never Ilya.

But what Ilya represents, now that people *know*.

Seeing them together doesn't just make the truth visible; it makes it undeniable. It shows up in the details Shane can't stop cataloguing: an arm slung around a waist instead of a shoulder, fingers hooking into belt loops without thinking. Shared wallets slapped onto the bar together. The casual trade-off of jackets, of bags, of space. The kisses—soft, absentminded, pressed to temples or hairlines. Innocent. Sweet. Normal to Shane now. And still, unmistakably, not what normal teammates do.

He thinks, not for the first time, that if he could erase a single word from existence, it would be *normal*.

Delete it entirely. No more comparisons, no invisible yardstick he keeps measuring himself against. No more wondering where the line is and whether he's crossed it just by existing the way he does now.

The thought doesn't calm him, exactly, but it does sharpen something into focus: how exhausting it is to keep negotiating with a standard he never agreed to in the first place.

After all, he's just having drinks with friends. That's it. No cameras. No press. No hidden agenda. He isn't even the most recognizable person in the room. Or at least not the most noticeable one. There are at least three guys here who get more attention than he does, louder personalities, bigger reputations.

And yet.

His knee bounces under the table, relentless. He forces it still, only for his fingers to pick up the habit instead, tapping against the condensation-slick glass in front of him. He laughs when someone says something funny, at first he thinks the timing is right, but then it feels a fraction too late, like he's watching himself do it from the outside. Performing normalcy instead of inhabiting it.

What makes it worse is that he knows exactly what this is.

Anxiety. Hypervigilance. Old wiring firing where it doesn't belong anymore. He's done the work. He's learned the language. He can name the responses, trace them back to their origins, talk about nervous systems and conditioned fear like it's a lecture he could give himself in his sleep.

Which is why the anger creeps in alongside the fear.

Because this shouldn't be happening anymore. Not now. Not here. Not after everything. He's married. He's out. He's safe. He has a therapist and coping strategies and a life he fought hard to build. He's *happy*. Happier than he has ever been before. Getting a drink with his teammates shouldn't feel like something to endure.

He presses his jaw shut, irritation turning inward, sharp and unforgiving. He's mad at his body for reacting. Mad at himself for letting it. Mad that even at a table full of people who would have his back without question, some part of him is still scanning for exits, still cataloguing threats.

Across the room, another burst of laughter goes up—too loud, too sudden—and Shane's shoulders jump before he can stop them. He exhales slowly through his nose, counts it out the way he was taught. In for four. Hold. Out for six.

It's fine, he tells himself again, stubborn now, like if he pushes hard enough the feeling will break. *This is fine. You're fine.*

"Here, moya lyubov," Ilya says, appearing back at his side and sliding smoothly into the bench seat.

Shane has to work to keep from flinching at the endearment. He adores it—adores the way Ilya says it like it's the most natural thing in the world—but his body reacts anyway, a sharp, reflexive spike of awareness. He hates that part of himself. Hates how jumpy he feels, how every soft thing seems to register at the same volume as a threat today. He reminds himself, firmly, that everyone at the table has heard far more than a pet name. Most of them were at their wedding, for fuck's sake. This shouldn't register as anything at all.

And it wouldn't have, last week.

Last week they'd been in a bar not unlike this one. Same kind of lighting, same sticky floors and cheap drinks. Ilya had dragged him onto a makeshift dance floor without a second thought, music slow and loud and indistinct. Shane had laughed, let himself be pulled in, fingers interlocked behind Ilya's neck as they swayed in the middle of a crowd that didn't care. He hadn't scanned the room once. Hadn't flinched when someone brushed past them. Hadn't bargained with himself about what was allowed.

The comparison to how he feels today lands hard, sharp with self-reproach. He knew going out in Montreal for the first time since he left for good wouldn't be easy, but he hates that it's this hard.

He wants to tell himself to just get over it. To snap out of it. To stop making a big deal out of nothing.

The thought comes fast and mean, reflexive in its own right.

He catches it, just barely, remembers the conversation with his therapist—the one about gentleness, about not holding himself to impossible standards on his worst days. About how progress isn't linear, and neither is healing. About how being kind to himself is part of the work, not a reward he has to earn.

The reminder doesn't fix anything, but it keeps the spiral from tightening further.

Ilya slides a glass across the table and sets it in front of him. Ginger ale. No ice clinking loud enough to startle him, no alcohol burn. Just bubbles, some sweetness, but not too much.

Shane looks down at it, then back up at Ilya, and despite everything else, something warm and almost giddy spreads through his chest.

He lets himself sit with that feeling instead of shoving it aside. Lets himself focus on the way Ilya always does this—always checks, always remembers, always makes sure there's ginger ale wherever they go, even when it means asking twice or scanning menus like it's a personal mission. It's such a small thing and it means everything.

His husband, Shane thinks, is very cute.

The thought settles him more than any breathing exercise has tonight, so Shane makes a choice and stays there. He might not be able to control which emotions show up—fear, tension, irritation, all of it piling in, whether he invites it or not—but he can decide which ones get the mic. He lets the others exist in the background, acknowledged but unattended, like noise from another room. They're there. They don't have to ruin the night.

That decision gives him just enough energy to step out of his head.

Without overthinking it, he leans in and presses a quick kiss to Ilya's cheek. A thank-you. A grounding point.

Ilya turns toward him immediately, instinctive as breathing, shoulder bumping into Shane's, thigh warm and solid against his own as Shane shifts closer. He lets himself feel it—the heat of Ilya's body from knee to shoulder, the familiar weight, the quiet certainty of proximity. The anxiety doesn't disappear, but it loosens its grip, edges dulling.

Ilya glances at him, eyebrow lifting in silent question.

Shane just smiles and nudges the ginger ale an inch closer to himself.

Comforted, steadied, he turns back toward the table.

Hayden is mid-rant about a missed call in the third period, gesturing wildly with a beer bottle like he's still on the ice diagramming plays. "I'm telling you, the ref was right there," he insists. "Like, close enough to borrow my stick."

"See, there's your problem," Hazy cuts in, grinning. "You assume the refs can see."

A chorus of groans follows.

"Oh, here we go," Dykstra says. "Mr. 'I've Never Committed a Penalty in My Life'"

"I play a clean game," Hazy prides himself.

Ilya snorts. "You are goalie," he says. "Different thing."

Laughter ripples around the table, easy and familiar. Someone elbows someone else. Someone else steals fries off a shared plate and immediately gets swatted for it. The conversation jumps tracks the way it always does, replaying a ridiculous save in the second period, arguing over a blown breakaway that will absolutely get roasted in the video room tomorrow, tallying up who owes who dinner over a bet Shane doesn't even remember being made.

"Hey, Hollander," Troy says, pointing at him. "You were flying tonight."

Shane blinks, momentarily surprised to be singled out, then shrugs. "Yeah? Felt like I missed some passes I shouldn't have."

"That's because you did," Ilya says promptly, utterly unapologetic.

In another life, that would've lodged somewhere sharp in Shane's chest. Would've made him smaller, quieter, too aware of himself.

In this one, it gets him out of his head. It makes him better.

"Still scored more goals than you," Shane shoots back easily. "Which means I have more points again."

Ilya clicks his tongue. "Do not get comfortable. Will not last long."

"So they still do this, then?" Hayden asks, looking around the table. He doesn't bother clarifying. No one needs him to.

"All the time," Luca says. Shane catches the way he sits a little straighter as he does, more confident than he used to be. Luca had taken a while to find his footing with Shane—caught somewhere between intimidated and star-struck when he first joined the team. Shane remembers Ilya finding the whole thing endlessly amusing.

"We're pretty sure it's some kind of foreplay for them," Brood adds.

"Accurate," Ilya says, deadpan.

Shane glares at him, heat creeping into his face. "Shut up," he says, but it comes out more fond than sharp, embarrassment tangled up with laughter he doesn't bother holding back.

The laughter comes easier now. He slips into the rhythm of the table—the back-and-forth, the easy ribbing that only works because it's undercut by trust. *We know each other well enough to be annoying*, it says. *We're good*.

Under the table, Shane's knee isn't bouncing anymore. Instead, he feels Ilya's hand there, thumb tracing small, absentminded circles like it belongs exactly where it is.

Chapter 4: Depression

Some days, Shane wakes up with his heart already singing.

Those are the mornings where the light feels kinder somehow, slipping through the curtains instead of barging in. Where his body comes online without resistance, without the familiar inventory of aches and cautions and quiet dread. He stretches and doesn't immediately brace for anything. His first thought isn't a checklist or a defense. It's something soft and buoyant, like *oh*, or *this is good*, or *I get to do this today*.

On some of those days, he rolls over and finds Ilya already awake, hair a disaster, mouth curved into a smile that looks like it was made specifically for Shane. They talk about nothing and everything at once. Ilya pitches his newest date idea with the kind of enthusiasm that feels so distinctively Ilya to Shane—some ridiculous combination of food and activity and surprise that will absolutely go off the rails halfway through. Shane listens, laughs, throws in practical objections he knows Ilya will ignore, and already feels warm with anticipation.

Later, he calls Rose before they make their way to the rink, pacing the kitchen while Ilya makes coffee too strong for anyone but himself. He tells her about the date plans, about Ilya's insistence that it will be "romantic but also stupid," about how he's pretending to be skeptical while secretly loving every second of it. Rose laughs, tells him he sounds ridiculous and happy, and Shane realizes she's right. He is. Unapologetically so.

On the ice, at practice, everything clicks. His body feels like an extension of intention, instead of something he has to negotiate with. He skates light, fast, confident, surrounded by teammates who trust him and see him and have his back without question. There's laughter at the bench, shoulder bumps, shouted encouragement. No second-guessing. No shrinking. Just movement and purpose and the quiet thrill of being good at something he loves, alongside people who value him for it.

Sometimes, there are dinners on those days. Family dinners. His parents across the table, Ilya at his side, the easy overlap of voices and clinking cutlery and shared stories. His dad asking how they like their renovated kitchen. His mom fussing over their playoff statistics. Ilya chiming in with commentary that makes everyone laugh, reaching for Shane's hand under the table like it's the most natural thing in the world. Shane sits there, solid and present, pride blooming in his chest so full it almost hurts. This is his life. This is real. This is allowed.

And always—*always*—there's Ilya. Waiting at the end of the day. Texting him stupid memes between meetings. Pressing a kiss to his temple in passing. Loving him openly, fiercely, without hesitation or apology. Shane loves him back with his whole chest, with everything he has, no parts held back. On those days, there is no edge to it. No fear tucked into the corners. Just love, full-force and unhindered, like breathing.

Those are the days when Shane feels complete. Grounded. Proud. Like the world has finally, mercifully, stopped asking him to justify his happiness.

This isn't one of those days.

Shane wakes with his body already weighed down, joints stiff like they've rusted overnight, heart heavy in a way that doesn't have a clear source. There's no soft easing into consciousness, no gentle lightness waiting for him. Just the quiet, immediate sense that everything is going to take more work than it should. He lies there for a minute longer than usual, staring at the ceiling, negotiating with himself about the simple act of getting out of bed.

He wins eventually. Technically.

The kitchen feels too bright. Too loud. He cracks a couple of eggs out of habit, scrambles them with mechanical efficiency, sits down at the table because that's what mornings require. He gets through maybe half before his stomach tightens, appetite folding in on itself like it's decided this isn't worth the effort. He stares at the plate for a moment, annoyed at himself, then gives up. Pushes it away untouched enough to feel like a failure, eaten enough to feel wasteful.

To clear his head, he takes Anya out for a run.

She explodes with joy the second the leash comes out, nails skittering against the floor, tail a blur. Her excitement is contagious, in theory. Shane lets himself smile when she barks at nothing in particular, when she bounds ahead and then circles back like she's checking to make sure he's still there. The cold air bites pleasantly at his lungs. For a few minutes, it almost works. The rhythm of their steps, the soft thud of paws against pavement, Anya's steady presence at his side—it all smooths the edges just a little.

But his mind doesn't quiet. It keeps circling, snagging on half-formed thoughts and old worries, refusing to settle into the cadence of movement. The run ends not because he feels better, but because he's tired of pretending it might fix him.

Back home, he showers.

The water is wrong. Too hot and too cold at once, somehow both. It pelts his skin in a way that feels harsh instead of soothing, every drop too noticeable, like his nerves are sitting right at the surface today. He turns the temperature back and forth, searching for something tolerable, never quite finding it. By the time he steps out, he feels scraped raw rather than refreshed.

Ilya is already gone, off doing some captain thing—meetings, obligations, responsibility. Normally, Shane would find plenty of things to do, would even enjoy some quiet hours all to himself. Today, it just underlines how empty their home feels.

So he doesn't bother pretending to be functional.

He pulls on an old sweater, one that's been washed soft and thin with age, and a pair of shorts that hang too loose on his hips. He pads back into the bedroom and crawls straight into their bed, curling in on himself like he's trying to disappear into the sheets. The space beside him is cold, unoccupied, the absence loud in a way he can't ignore.

Even Anya doesn't follow him.

She stays in the living room, sprawled happily in her dog bed where the sunlight pools warm on the floor. Shane can't blame her. If he had a choice, he wouldn't choose the storm clouds he dragged out of sleep, either.

He lies there and lets the hours pass.

There's no scrolling, no distraction, no attempt to reroute his thoughts into something more manageable. Just the quiet of the bedroom and the weight of his own mind pressing in from all sides. Thoughts move through him unchecked, one after another, overlapping and tangling, carrying everything they bring with them. Regret. Sadness. Frustration. Longing. He doesn't try to sort them or rank them. He just lets them come.

His therapist's voice drifts back to him, calm and steady, a memory more than a sound. "You don't have to push the bad feelings away every time," she'd said. "Not always. Not when you have the space for them. Sometimes, when the moment is right, when you're safe enough, you let them happen. You let sadness sink its teeth in. You let anger flare and burn itself out. You let frustration spill over into tears if that's what it wants to be."

So Shane tries.

He doesn't fight the heaviness. Doesn't tell himself to get up, to be productive, to snap out of it. He lets the ache settle fully in his chest, lets it drag him down into the mattress until he feels almost fused with it. It's unpleasant in a way that's hard to describe. There's no relief in it. No catharsis. Just the raw experience of feeling too much.

What surfaces isn't rage, exactly. Not today. It's grief.

Grief for the things he didn't get. For the moments that should have been easy and weren't. For all the times anxiety crept in and left its fingerprints on what could have been carefree. Nights out cut short, hands pulled back at the wrong moment, joy dulled by vigilance. He knows, rationally, that none of it was his fault. That he did the best he could with the tools he had at the time. He's accepted that, more or less.

Acceptance, it turns out, doesn't cancel out mourning.

He thinks about the version of his life where circumstances had been kinder. Where loving Ilya hadn't come with an edge of fear for so long. Where he himself had been gentler with his own limits, less demanding, less cruel in the way he expected himself to simply be okay. He imagines all the small, ordinary moments that might have been lighter—more laughter, fewer apologies swallowed before they ever reached his lips.

The loss of those imagined moments sits heavy and tender inside him. He lets it. Lets the sadness curl through him, slow and aching, until his eyes burn and his throat tightens. He doesn't try to make it productive or meaningful. He doesn't look for a lesson.

He just mourns.

For the life he has now, which he loves fiercely. And for the ease he wishes it had been allowed from the start.

The next thing Shane notices is Ilya at the side of the bed.

He doesn't remember hearing the door open. Doesn't remember footsteps, or Anya's reaction, or the sounds of someone entering the bedroom. But he knows it must have happened. Ilya would have greeted Anya first, his voice going into that fond, ridiculous register he uses only with her. He would have let her out into the garden, maybe called Shane's name once or twice, growing uneasy when there was no answer.

"I'm sorry," Shane says, the word slipping out before he's fully oriented. It feels reflexive. Apology as punctuation.

Ilya doesn't respond right away.

He stands there for a moment, looking at Shane the way he always does when something's wrong: quiet, attentive, cataloguing. Taking in the slump of his shoulders, the redness around his eyes, the way his body is curled inward like it's trying to take up less space. Shane doesn't make any effort to smooth it over. He doesn't smile. Doesn't deflect. He lets himself be seen as he is.

After a beat, Ilya shrugs out of his sweater, then his pants, movements unhurried. He climbs into bed beside Shane and settles close, fitting himself into the curve Shane leaves open without either of them having to think about it. His thumb comes up to trace slow, gentle arcs along Shane's cheek, grounding in its simplicity.

"Bad day?" Ilya asks.

Not because he doesn't know. Because the question is an open door for Shane to step through if he feels up to it. Because sometimes naming it is the hardest part, and Ilya is careful not to make it harder than it needs to be.

Shane swallows. The words feel heavy, clumsy. "Just... sad," he says finally. It's the closest he can get right now without everything spilling out at once. He'll find the rest of it later, when it doesn't feel quite so raw, so close to the surface.

Ilya nods, accepting that answer for what it is. Then, gently, "Like me?"

There's no accusation in it. Just concern. Shane knows Ilya understands, intellectually, that sadness isn't a single shape, that depression doesn't look the same every time. But he also knows how easily Ilya's mind runs ahead, how quickly it leaps to worst-case scenarios when Shane goes quiet.

"No," Shane says quickly. He shifts closer, forehead nearly brushing Ilya's collarbone. "Different sad." He searches for the right phrasing, aware of how careful he's being. "I'm not... stealing your thing."

Ilya exhales, something like a sigh, something like a laugh. He doesn't argue, even though Shane knows he wants to. They've had this conversation before—one of the few where understanding hasn't translated into agreement. Shane knows Ilya hates the idea that pain is a limited resource. Shane, stubbornly, still worries about taking up space that doesn't belong to him.

"We are married," Ilya says instead, voice steady. "We can share."

The simplicity of it hits harder than any argument could.

Shane nods, the motion small, and curls into Ilya's chest. Ilya's arm comes around him without hesitation, hand settling at his back, firm and warm. Shane lets himself sink into the hold, lets the day rest there between them, not fixed, not explained—just held.

"I love you," Shane says.

The words come easily, without effort or doubt. No matter how crowded his head gets, no matter how loud everything else is, this feeling is always there, clear as gravity, constant as breath. It doesn't waver.

Ilya's answer is immediate. "I love you, too."

Shane shifts closer so he can hear it properly, so he can take it in the way he needs to. He presses his mouth to Ilya's, not rushed, not desperate, just intent. Like he's memorizing the shape of it. Like he's swallowing the words straight from Ilya's lips, letting them settle deep in his chest where they belong.

The kiss is slow, unhurried, mouths fitting together with the kind of familiarity that doesn't dull but deepens. Ilya tastes like home. Like safety. Shane lets himself linger there, breathing him in, letting the reassurance seep through him molecule by molecule.

Hands begin to move—not urgently, not yet—but with intention. Ilya's palm settles against Shane's side, warm and grounding, thumb tracing small, absentminded arcs that Shane has felt a thousand times before and still reacts to every single time. It's not just touch; it's recognition. A quiet reminder: *I know you're here. I have you.*

Shane exhales, tension leaking out of him in a long, shaky breath. His body responds before his mind can interfere, muscles loosening as Ilya's touch grows more confident, more encompassing. He presses closer, instinctively seeking the solid line of Ilya's chest, the steady beat of his heart. It's easier like this.

They take their time undressing the few clothes that still act as a barrier between them, not because there's any need for slowness, but because neither of them wants to rush past this part. Fingers brush skin, linger at wrists and shoulders, skim over familiar scars and old aches with care that borders on reverence. Every touch feels like a question asked and answered at the same time.

Shane's thoughts finally begin to quiet, not silenced but softened, pushed to the edges by sensation. The weight he's been carrying all day loosens its grip as Ilya kisses along his jaw,

his throat, the sensitive places that always make Shane shiver. He feels seen in a way that has nothing to do with being watched—seen as in known, as in held in someone's hands without fear.

They move together like they're following a map they drew years ago and keep refining, learning new paths while never losing the old ones. Shane's body arches instinctively into Ilya's touch, chasing warmth, pressure, closeness. Every sensation feels amplified, not sharp or overwhelming, but rich, layered. Like color returning to the world.

There's a moment, there always is, where Shane feels himself start to unravel, emotions crowding in alongside the physical intensity. Vulnerability rises, raw and open, and instead of flinching away from it, he lets it happen. Lets Ilya see all of it. Lets himself be open and soft and unguarded, trusting completely that he won't be dropped.

Ilya murmurs his name like a promise, like an anchor, hands steady even as everything else seems to dissolve. Shane clings to him, breath hitching, the line between them blurring until it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. It feels less like two bodies and more like one shared rhythm. One breath, one pulse, one moment suspended outside of time.

When Shane finally comes undone, it's not with a sense of breaking, but of release. Like something knotted deep inside him has finally been loosened. He collapses into Ilya's hold, spent and warm and profoundly safe, heart racing even as his thoughts go blissfully quiet.

He never feels as whole as he does when he falls apart under Ilya's hands.

Chapter 5: Acceptance

It's already been a long day, the kind that leaves a pleasant, low-grade tiredness humming through Shane's bones. The house still smells faintly like smoke and grilled vegetables and sunscreen, echoes of the barbecue lingering in the quiet. Most of it has been cleaned up, counters wiped, chairs pushed back into place. Most of it.

There's just one more thing he wants to do before the day can be put to rest.

"Come to bed," Ilya calls from the bedroom, voice muffled by distance but unmistakably warm. Shane smiles to himself, the expression settling easily.

"In a minute," he calls back, glancing down at his phone again. He really wants to finish this first.

"Hurry up," Ilya says, and Shane can hear the pout even without seeing him. "I miss you."

It's ridiculous, Shane thinks fondly. They were standing shoulder to shoulder in the kitchen less than five minutes ago, putting leftovers into containers, brushing past each other with casual touches that lingered longer than necessary. And still—still, he misses Ilya too.

It's silly. He wouldn't change it for the world.

Shane settles more comfortably at the table and scrolls through his camera roll, the familiar ache of abundance tugging at him as he starts selecting photos from the summer. Not curated yet, just moments, caught as they were.

There's one from earlier today: the backyard strung with uneven fairy lights, folding tables crowded with mismatched dishes. His parents mid-laugh, his mom's hand on his dad's arm. Friends clustered together, plastic cups raised, faces flushed from heat and happiness. Anya sprawled under the table like she owns the place, which, frankly, she does in everything but name.

Another from the same afternoon: Ilya at the grill, tongs in hand, brow furrowed in exaggerated concentration like he's defusing a bomb instead of flipping burgers. Someone clearly said something ridiculous right as the photo was taken, because Ilya's mouth is tilted, halfway to a grin, eyes already betraying him.

Shane adds it to the selection.

He scrolls further back, past today and into the quieter parts of summer. Ilya at the lake, sunlight turning the water into something almost unreal, his hair damp and pushed back, skin glowing in that effortless way that still makes Shane's chest ache if he thinks about it too hard.

Shane on a hike a few weeks ago, boots muddy, face flushed, smiling into the camera with a freedom that had surprised him when he saw it later. Proof, he thinks, of a moment when his

body and mind were on the same side.

There's one of them together that he hesitates over for a second before choosing. It's not dramatic. No big gestures. Just Ilya leaning in, a kiss pressed to Shane's cheek, lips barely touching skin. Shane's smile is soft and unguarded, eyes closed, like he forgot the camera was there at all. It doesn't give everything away, but it gives enough.

He likes that.

As he arranges the photos, there's no sharp edge to the memories that surface. The harder moments are still there, tucked into the background where they belong, but they don't demand his attention tonight. Tonight feels more about letting things exist as they are—messy, beautiful, imperfect, and still deeply good.

Behind him, the hallway creaks softly.

"Shane," Ilya calls again, teasing warmth threaded through the word. "You are going to fall asleep at table."

Shane laughs under his breath, thumbs hovering for a moment before he types the simplest thing he can think of: "summer" followed by a heart. No long caption, no detailed declarations. Ilya is better at those, always has been. Shane presses post and lets that be enough.

He stands, muscles protesting pleasantly, and turns off the light. The kitchen slips into shadow, calm and familiar, like it's settling in for the night too. He detours into the bathroom, goes through the motions on autopilot. Brush teeth, rinse, change into soft sleepwear that's seen better days but feels like home anyway.

When he pushes the bedroom door open again, Ilya is already tucked in, pillows piled just right, phone held loosely in one hand. He looks up immediately, eyes bright, something like wonder flickering across his face.

"You are showing us off," Ilya says, a little stunned. Like he's still getting used to the fact that this is real. That Shane does this now.

Shane pauses, that old reflex stirring just enough to be noticeable. "You said you were okay with me posting something," he says, carefully casual. "You're still okay with it, right?"

The anxiety is there, but it's muted, manageable. A background hum instead of a blaring alarm. He registers it, acknowledges it, and keeps going.

"Okay with it?" Ilya echoes, then breaks into a grin so wide it borders on ridiculous. "Yes. Very. I like it."

"Oh," Shane says, warmth spreading through him despite himself. "You do?"

He does know this, really. Knows Ilya likes it when Shane is visible like this, when he doesn't shrink or hedge or hide. Knows Ilya enjoys letting the world see how in love they are. Shane can't fault him for it.

If he's honest, he kind of likes it, too.

He climbs into bed, fitting himself easily into the space beside Ilya, the way their bodies seem to have learned each other by instinct and memory. Ilya puts his phone away without looking, attention already fully on Shane.

Shane shifts closer as soon as he's under the covers, the mattress dipping in a way that feels familiar enough to be comforting all on its own. Ilya adjusts without thinking, an arm sliding around Shane's waist, tugging him in until there's no space left to account for. Their legs tangle easily, practiced, like muscle memory rather than decision.

"Better," Ilya murmurs, half-drowsy.

Shane hums in agreement and settles, cheek pressed against Ilya's shoulder, breathing him in. Soap and clean cotton, the faint lingering trace of smoke from earlier, something warm and unmistakably home. His body loosens in response, tension slipping free without ceremony.

Ilya shifts again, just enough to glance down at him. "Only summer and heart," he says, amused. "You are getting very mysterious."

Shane groans softly and tips his head back against the pillow. "It didn't need more," he says. "You're the one who writes essays."

"They are not essays," Ilya protests, affronted. "They are... thoughtful reflections."

"Uh-huh, big words."

"I would have written poem," Ilya adds, eyes bright with mischief. "People love poem. Maybe I will do it next time."

Shane snorts. "Please don't."

"You do not believe in my artistic vision," Ilya says solemnly, then immediately ruins it by grinning. "Very sad for you."

"Tragic," Shane agrees, deadpan. "I'll survive."

Ilya laughs, the sound vibrating against Shane's body. He presses a kiss into Shane's hair, absentminded and affectionate, like punctuation at the end of the moment. Shane tilts into it without thinking, grounding himself in the simple fact of him being here.

They lapse into an easy quiet, the kind that doesn't need filling. Shane listens to the distant hum of the house settling, the faint click of pipes somewhere in the walls. Outside, something rustles in the yard—probably a night breeze stirring the leaves. It all feels contained, safe.

After a minute, Ilya speaks again. "You were good host today," he says. "Your mom likes when you do the salads."

"She likes when anyone else does the salads," Shane replies. "It means she doesn't have to."

“Still,” Ilya insists. “You were glowing.”

Shane huffs quietly. “That might’ve been sweat.”

“No,” Ilya says, firm. “Glow.”

Shane doesn’t argue. He just nudges closer, knee pressing into Ilya’s thigh.

They talk a little about nothing. About the leftover containers stacked too precariously in the fridge, about whether Troy genuinely knows how to fix a fence or just talks like someone who’s watched a video once, about how Anya has very clearly chosen a favorite among their friends and how deeply offended Ilya is that it’s Hayden. The conversation drifts the way it always does at the end of a good day, looping back on itself, dissolving into half-finished thoughts and soft, breathy laughter.

At some point, Shane notices his breathing has synced with Ilya’s. The realization comes quietly, almost accidentally. His shoulders feel loose, heavy in a good way. The low-level hum he’s been carrying all day isn’t gone—not erased, not fixed—but it’s quiet enough now to share the space with everything else without taking over.

Ilya’s thumb traces slow, idle circles against Shane’s side. It’s not meant to soothe or distract, not meant to lead anywhere. It’s just there. Presence without agenda. Shane lets his eyes fall shut, lets the motion tether him to the now.

“Hey,” Ilya murmurs after a while, voice thick with sleep.

“Yeah?”

“I like that you posted,” he says simply.

Shane smiles into the dark. “So you’ve mentioned.”

“I like that you are more comfortable now,” Ilya adds after a beat. “With sharing.”

“I thought you didn’t like sharing,” Shane says lightly, though he doesn’t quite open his eyes.

“I don’t share *you*,” Ilya replies, and despite the drowsiness, there’s something firm and unmistakably possessive in his voice. It sends a quiet shiver through Shane. “I meant sharing *about* us.”

Shane exhales slowly. He’s aware, in a distant and honest way, that this won’t always feel like this. That there will be days where openness feels harder again, where the fear presses close and the idea of being seen feels like too much. He knows progress isn’t a straight line. He’s learned that part.

But tonight? Tonight feels different. Still a little scary. Still charged. Just... good, too.

“Guess I finally figured out how,” he says, and is quite proud of it.

Ilya hums, satisfied, and pulls him in just a fraction closer, like sealing the thought in place. Shane settles against him without resistance, letting the moment be what it is (quiet, perfect, real) and lets himself stay there until sleep finally claims them both.

End Notes

This author thrives on comments, feedback, and prompts—so you can directly boost my productivity just by leaving a few words in the comments!

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